Holism, Realism and Truth: How to be an Anti-relativist and Not Give Up on Heidegger (or Davidson) – A Response to Christopher Norris

Jeff Malpas, University of Tasmania

Christopher Norris has always worked across both the European and the Anglo-American analytic traditions. At the same time, he has always been steadfast in his opposition to various forms of relativism, and what might broadly be construed as 'anti-realism', within contemporary philosophy.[1] In his 1985 book, <u>The Contest of the Faculties,</u> he also seemed to be one of the few readers of Donald Davidson's work who had a good sense of what that work might really be about including its anti-relativist implications.[2] Norris' ability to engage sympathetically with both Davidson and Derrida connected well with my interests in finding a way to do philosophy that could move between the so-called 'analytic' and 'continental' traditions, while his own anti-relativism seemed in accord with my own commitment to developing what I took to be the essentially realist, if nevertheless also 'holistic' elements present in Davidsonian radical interpretation. I was thus somewhat surprised and puzzled when, in the 1990s, Norris' work underwent a major shift away from Davidson. Indeed, in Norris' 1997 essays 'Minimalist Semantics and the Hermeneutic Turn: On "Post-Analytical Philosophy"'[3] and 'Some dilemmas of post-empiricism: hermeneutic themes in philosophy of language and science',[4] I found myself, along with Hubert Dreyfus, Mark Okrent, Joe Rouse and Richard Rorty, identified as one of those who, through their rejection of positivism and empiricism, and espousal of a Heideggerian 'depth-hermeneutical' approach, had thereby given up on notions of truth and objectivity in return for some form of pragmatist 'anti-realism'.

Quite apart from the fact that Norris' account of my position, as well as of Davidson's, appears to misrepresent our intentions and commitments on these matters, it also seems to me that Norris' rejection of the holist and interpretivist underpinnings of that position (what Norris refers to as a 'depth-hermeneutical'

approach) leads him to abandon a set of arguments that provide perhaps the best case against relativism and anti-realism available to us. Relativism is not shown to be mistaken by simply reiterating some standard version of empiricism or realism, nor even by appealing to the more nuanced 'critical realism' of such as Roy Bhaskar. And the reason for this is that many of the premises that underlie relativism also underlie many versions of realism as such. The commitment, for instance, to what Davidson referred to as 'the myth of the subjective' – the idea that there is a realm of mental 'objects' that is private and 'internal' to the mind standing in clear distinction from the external public world of events and entities – itself underpins many versions of both realism and anti-realism. A major emphasis in my own work, one that derives directly from Davidson, is that we cannot understand the ream of the mental or the intentional except inasmuch as it is already given over, both in terms of being caused by and referentially related to, those real entities and events that make up the world around us. Moreover, while the language and style is very different, it is this idea that also seems to me to be a core element in the work of thinkers within the hermeneutic tradition such as Heidegger and Gadamer. Thus, if we are to see why and how relativism, and the various forms of anti-realism that are its kin, are mistaken, we need to understand how a certain form of realism (although not the realism invoked in the usual 'realism/anti-realism' dichotomy[5]) is actually foundational to the possibility of meaning, belief, and knowledge. One way to put this point is by emphasising the centrality of the concept of truth – and of truth as non-relative and objective – although this also entails a concept of truth that is irreducible to any other notion (not correspondence, coherence or any of the usual suspects). This essay is a response to Norris that aims to address some of the points in his original critique, while also elaborating some of the reasons why a holist, interpretivist – even 'hermeneutical' – approach may indeed be the best answer to relativism; why one can retain a commitment to a form of realism while not giving up on Davidson or even on Heidegger.

It is worth noting, right from the start, the extent to which my own work, as well as that of Davidson (and to a lesser extent that of Dreyfus and others[6]), has explicitly situated itself in opposition to relativism and anti-realism. Thus, in the 1992 book, <u>Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning</u>, that is the focus for much of Norris' discussion of my work, I argue against standard forms of relativism that reject the objectivity of truth[7] as well as against anti-realist approaches that take truth to be

primarily a matter of coherence.[8] At the same time I advance what I then termed a 'presuppositional' form of realism that 'reaffirms our place within the world, and reaffirms the centrality and primacy of truth itself.'[9] Davidson too has explicitly rejected any reading of his work that would take him to espouse a relativist or anti-realist position. Although Davidson has expressed dissatisfaction with philosophical realism as an alternative to anti-realism, he is equally critical of anti-realism in all its varieties:

Antirealism is a manifestation of the irrepressible urge in Western philosophy to insure that whatever is real can be known: antirealism attempts to achieve this by reading out of existence whatever it decrees lies beyond the scope of human knowledge… Most reductive isms should count as forms of antirealism: idealism, pragmatism, empiricism, materialism, behaviourism, verificationism. Each tries to trim reality down to fit within its epistemology. Each of these positions offers consolations…but these sops to scepticism should not deceive us: antirealisms remain sour grapes philosophies. Their motto is: if you can't grasp the grapes (in some approved sense), they aren't just sour, they were never there in the first place.[10]

In opposition to antirealism Davidson argues for the objectivity of truth, including the objectivity of <u>evaluative</u> judgments.[11] Indeed, in his argument against antirealism and in favour of objectivity, Davidson largely reiterates the rejection of relativism as a form of antirealism that was made explicit in his argument against the scheme-content dichotomy and that was already a feature of his adoption of the principle of charity.

The anti-realism that Norris nevertheless claims to be a feature of my position, as well as Davidson's and that of many contemporary philosophers such as Dreyfus, Okrent and Rorty, supposedly follows from our disillusionment with empiricism (which Davidson, in the passage above, , and particularly with empiricist strategies in the philosophy of language. It is our rejection of such strategies, and our adoption of a 'depth-hermeneutical' approach taken from Heidegger and grafted on to Davidson (with an admixture of influences from Quine and Wittgenstein), that, so the diagnosis goes, leads to our abandonment of realism. A crucial step on this anti-realist path is, as Norris tells it, the adoption of 'holistic …conceptions of meaning and truth that reject any appeal to grounds of knowledge or terms of understanding other than those that happen to exist within some cultural life-form, interpretive community, hermeneutic 'horizon', speech-situation, or whatever.'[12] Such holisms have no truck with 'epistemological (or proposition-based) theories' that would treat, for instance,

linguistic understanding as explicable on the basis of speakers' intentions and shared semantic and syntactic rules.[13]

There is a great deal that Norris appears to assume in the way he characterises the holistic and hermeneutic approaches he also condemns. Indeed, that such approaches carry relativistic or anti-realist consequences seems not to be argued for so much as simply taken for granted. Moreover, even in his reading of Davidson on specific issues in relation to the theory of meaning, Norris appears simply to misconstrue key elements of the Davidsonian position. According to Norris, Davidson adopts, at least in his later writings, 'a contextualist approach that in principle respects speaker's intent but only as a matter of intuitive guesswork quite divorced from the idea of "knowing a language" or possessing more than a minimal grasp…of what the grammar and semantics entail'[14] and Norris goes on:

as Karl-Otto Apel remarks, one might as well press all the way with this argument and count linguistic meaning simply irrelevant for the purposes of communicative uptake. Apel makes the point with reference to Grice's example of the shop merchant in Port Said who says in Arabic to a passing tourist 'You pig of an Englishman!', these words accompanied by an alluring smile and taken to mean 'Please come into my shop!' On the Gricean view – which Davidson apparently accepts – this latter would indeed be the <u>meaning</u> of the merchant's words, since that meaning cannot be construed in any other way than as identical with their gist (or their intended perlocutionary effect) as registered by the tourist.[15]

Norris (as well as Apel) gives brief consideration to the possibility that this reading – a reading that is proposed by Grice in his original presentation of the example used here[16] – might not be one that Davidson would have accepted, but since the only alternative that is envisaged by Norris (and by Apel) is one that depends on an acceptance of meaning as determined by some shared knowledge of syntax and semantics, and since Norris notes that Davidson is quite clear in abjuring such an view, the conclusion is thereby drawn that the interpretation of the merchant's 'You pig of an Englishman!' as 'Please come into my shop' is indeed the 'unavoidable consequence'[17] of Davidson's approach. In fact, Davidson's actual treatment of this type of example is rather different from that which Norris (and Apel) assumes. In 'The Structure and Content of Truth' Davidson writes:

An utterance has certain truth conditions only if the speaker intends it to be interpreted as having those truth conditions… Someone may say something that would normally be offensive or insulting in a language he believes his hearers do not understand; but in this case his audience for the purpose of interpretation is obviously just the speaker himself.[18]

So the meaning of the merchant's utterance, on this account, is just what the conventional interpretation would take it to be. This is not to say that conventional and intended meaning might not come apart – the examples of malapropisms or slips of the tongue are cases in point – but it is to say that Davidson cannot be taken as committed to the view that conventional or 'linguistic' meaning is 'simply irrelevant for the purposes of communicative uptake.' Whether the conventional meaning of an utterance matters, and how much it matters, depends very much on the particular communicative situation. Thus it would certainly be odd (though perhaps not impossible) to suppose that our Port Said merchant might utter something that means, in conventional usage, 'Please come into my shop' to an English tourist he believes does not understand him and mean by that utterance 'You pig of an Englishman!'[19] Conventional meaning is not irrelevant to linguistic utterance – it certainly plays an enormous role in <u>facilitating</u> communication – but the Davidsonian point is that it is not <u>essential</u> for communication to be possible.

Davidson's position here is one set out in a number of papers, most notably in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'[20] and 'Communication and Convention'.[21] Summarising that position Davidson writes that:

I held (and hold) that the linguistic skills people typically bring to conversational occasions can and do differ considerably, but mutual understanding is achieved through the exercise of imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and awareness of human interests and attitudes. Of course I did not deny that in practice people usually depend on a supply of words and syntactic devices which they have learned to employ in similar ways. What I denied was that such sharing is sufficient to explain our actual communicative achievements, and more important, I denied that even such limited sharing is necessary.[22]

The main target of Davidson's discussion in these papers is the idea that linguistic understanding is to be explained on the basis of the shared, priorly-held knowledge of syntactic and semantic rules that speakers' bring to a linguistic encounter. Davidson denies that linguistic understanding can be explained in this way and he denies also

that such shared, priorly-held knowledge is necessary for such understanding. One provocative way in which Davidson puts this point is to say that there is no such thing as a language – which is to say that there is no priorly-held linguistic theory that is shared between speakers and that provides the necessary basis for communication between them.[23] On this point Davidson stands in clear opposition to what is more or less the established consensus in contemporary philosophy of language and according to which meaning is to be understood, within certain Gricean constraints, as the outcome of speakers' internalised representations of semantic and syntactic conventions. But if Apel and Norris are correct in their grasp of this aspect of the Davidsonian position, they nevertheless misread that position when they present it, in Norris' words, as severing the link 'between speaker's intentions and the public … norms of linguistic understanding'[24] or when they take Davidson to hold the view that, to quote from Norris again, meaning 'like truth – just is whatever we make of it in this or that context of localized utterance or belief'.[25]

The cases of malapropism, slips of the tongue and linguistic invention all indicate the inadequacy of any wholly conventionalist rule-based approach to linguistic understanding, but this does not mean that Davidson views such understanding as proceeding on some solipsistic, asocial basis.[26] Indeed, one of the characteristic features of Davidson's approach has been an emphasis on the necessarily social character, not merely of meaning, but of belief, desire and of the propositional attitudes in general. It is the denial of convention as the basis for language, and not the denial of its social character, that marks Davidson off from many others who also adopt a social view of language. Thus, while Davidson argues, like Wittgenstein, against the idea of a private language, he explicitly differentiates his position from that of the Kripkean Wittgenstein for whom the existence of a language is dependent on there being some 'routine' that speaker and interpreter can share.[27] While Davidson does not deny that shared routines may play some role in communication and interpretation, they are not that on which it is founded. Instead it is our capacity to engage with one another, with ourselves and with a wider world – an engagement that cannot be given any formal or apriori specification – that underpins language as well as the propositional attitudes, and, indeed, the possibility of content as such.

If linguistic understanding and communication were just a matter of applying some set of commonly held 'routines', it is hard to see how one could understand

anyone who spoke a different language or who spoke a language that deviated from the norms as instantiated in those routines. Indeed, often one finds that approaches to language that emphasise linguistic understanding as founded in conventional agreement (and such approaches may sometimes proceed from holistic premises) are also prone to varieties of relativism – as are most approaches that treat understanding in this way. If understanding depends on what is shared, then where there is no commonality, there will be no mutual understanding either. And from there, it is a short step, assuming one does not wish simply to write-off those modes of understanding that are supposedly different from one's own, to talk of different 'paradigms', different 'worlds', different 'truths'. Yet in any case, as Davidson also points out, appeal to convention as the basis for linguistic understanding cannot explain such understanding, since it leaves us with the problem of how the conventions are themselves understood or established. Rather than treat linguistic understanding as founded in convention, Davidson argues that conventions themselves depend on language and that linguistic understanding itself must be understood as founded in our more general capacity to get along in the world. Thus, in abandoning the idea of language as grounded in convention, we have indeed 'erased the boundary between knowing a language and finding our way around in the world generally'[28] or, as the point may also be put, we are able to recognise the way our capacity to grasp meaning is always dependent on our prior capacity to grasp truths, and this latter capacity is not something that is amenable to any final or complete analysis.

It is hard to see why we should regard this position as evidence of, to use the words Norris quotes from Apel, 'a strangely regressive tendency' or a 'massive (and massively disabling) confusion of realms.'[29] The point is that our knowledge of language and of the world are not separable from one another – just as they are not separable from our knowledge of ourselves or of our fellow communicators (our 'co-subjects of speech' as Apel puts it) – and that knowledge is neither mediated by nor dependent upon some set of linguistic rules or conventions. Davidson's own opposition to anti-realism and to relativism is founded on this rejection of rule-based conceptions of language and the distinctions that are founded upon them. This does not mean that we cannot distinguish between what we say about things and the things themselves nor between the way you speak and the way I speak. But it does mean that

we cannot treat language as something that stands over against the world as its 'other' nor as wholly captured by any set of abstract rules.

In all of this Norris's account of the Davidsonian position is quite at odds with his own earlier treatment of Davidson in The Contest of the Faculties. There Norris presents Davidson as providing a powerful argument against sceptical and relativist approaches of the sort adopted by, on Norris's account, de Man, Foucault, Rorty and others – an argument, Norris tells us, that 'puts Davidson squarely at odds with the relativist conclusion that post-structuralists draw from Saussure's doctrine of the "arbitrary" nature of the sign.'[30] He notes that although Convention T 'at first sight …appears quite redundant and uninformative', it nevertheless provides a means 'of explaining how the "primitive concept" of truth might apply both within and across all varieties of natural language'[31] (in his more recent discussion Norris seems to treat Davidson's use of Tarski as rendering talk of truth 'largely redundant'.[32]). Even on the question of the role of convention in linguistic understanding Norris's sympathies appear, in his earlier discussion, to lie wholly with Davidson and for precisely the reason that, as Norris himself puts matters, '[t]o make 'convention' the ground of appeal is to relativize language without leaving anything to which it could intelligibly be said to relate. Thus, a thoroughgoing conventionalism explains precisely nothing in so far as it removes the very grounds of rational explanation'.[33]

Significantly, the Davidsonian rejection of convention as the basis for understanding, whether linguistic or otherwise, can be seen to parallel the Heideggerian and Gadamerian rejection of the subjectivist accounts of understanding prevalent in nineteenth-century hermeneutics. This is most obviously so in Gadamer's Truth and Method in which the Schleiermacherian idea of understanding as a matter of gaining access to the interiority of the author – to re-think or re-rexperience that of which the text is an outward expression – is shown to be, not only impossible, but also unnecessary. Instead, understanding proceeds through a dialogic engagement between ourselves and the object (or subject-matter – die Sache) of interpretation.[34] While Gadamer sometimes talks as if this engagement results in the establishment of some common 'horizon' or 'language', the ongoing character of understanding means that such commonality is more akin to a Davidsonian 'passing theory' than to something that represents the end-point of the interpretive dialogue.[35] It is precisely in our encounter with the objects that we seek to understand, and the way that encounter occurs within an intersubjective space opened up by our own historicity, and so by the

fact of our being 'always already' given over to involvement in the world, that understanding is made possible.[36]

Not only is this account one that is resolutely anti-relativist, since it makes engagement with the object and with others a necessary condition of understanding, but it is also realist, since it gives a central role to the object as that to which our understanding must accord, and a concept of truth that goes beyond individual or collective subjectivity even though it arises only in relation to it. Indeed, Gadamer's rejection of the epistemological preoccupation with 'method' is based in his insistence on the way truth arises only out of our dialogic engagement with others and with the world – an engagement that cannot be predicted or mapped out in advance. Similarly, in Davidson, we find a refusal to allow that there is any epistemological guarantee of the truth of any specific claim to knowledge – the only way to test our beliefs is by the usual processes of evaluation, observation, experimentation and so forth.[37] And just as none of our individual beliefs are immune to error, neither are any of these processes immune either. This is one of the reasons why science turns out to be such an important activity – the development of knowledge and understanding depends on an ongoing process of investigation that depends on our active involvement with the events and entities that are the focus of our inquiries, and in which nothing can tell us in advance as to where our investigations may lead nor provide any certain guard against our being led astray.

The sort of 'engagement' with the world that is at issue in Gadamer's work as well as Heidegger's, and that is also to be found in Davidson, is not merely a matter of our having some active orientation towards real world events and entities, but more than that, it concerns the way in which our own existence as agents and thinkers is, as it were, defined and determined in necessary relation to the events and entities towards which we act and about which we think. It is this account that is at the heart of the ideas of charity and also triangulation that I referred to above. Both ideas can be seen as expressions of Davidson's commitment to an 'externalism' theory of mental content that can itself be seen as a consequence of Davidsonian holism.[38]

Davidson's original characterization of the problem of interpretation is in terms of the interdependence of meaning and belief.[39] Although Davidson denies that there is any straightforward dependence between a speaker's intention's in speaking and the words spoken, it is the case that he holds that what a sentence means depends on what the speaker of that sentence believes and this follows simply from the fact

that spoken sentences are expressions of beliefs and other attitudes. Moreover, beliefs, as well as other attitudes, are themselves interdependent such that the content of one belief depends on the content of the other beliefs with which it is associated. It is this interdependence that is drawn on in Davidson's employment of the principle of charity. Since belief and meaning are interdependent, we can use the beliefs of speakers as the basis for assigning meanings to their utterances; on the assumption that our beliefs are similar to those of other speakers – the principle of charity – we can assign meanings to others on the basis of the beliefs we ourselves hold. Of course, since what we believe is what we hold to be true, so charity can also be viewed in terms of the idea that meaning is dependent on truth, and that the way to assign meanings to sentences is on the basis of what is true. Indeed, to proceed in any other way, Davidson argues, would undermine the very possibility of meaning. Put slightly differently, one can say that the principle of charity already expresses an externalist conception of interpretation inasmuch as it treats interpretation, and so the assigning of content to beliefs and utterances, as always dependent on being able to relate the speaker to aspects of the real world in which the speaker is located and that are the causes of the beliefs and utterances at issue.

Although talk of charity largely disappears from Davidson's later writings, the basic considerations that underlie the principle do not – indeed, one might argue that these considerations become even more significant as the idea of triangulation becomes more important and more clearly developed.[40] Triangulation is a term originally employed in a domain quite outside the sphere of philosophy – that of traditional surveying practice – and is a means for the determination of relative position. It involves taking a sighting from each of two already known locations to a particular site or landmark whose location is to be determined – the point of intersection between the two sightings fixes the location in question. Davidson applies this basic model to the structure of interpretation, and more broadly, to the structure of our interaction with others and with the world. Davidson describes the structure at issue in terms of the way in which one creature is able to correlate its own responses to features of the physical environment with those of other creatures through being able to correlate the responses of those other creatures to the same features of the environment – in each case the correlation between response and environmental feature must be based on the way the feature provokes, and so causes, the response (in this latter respect the account has parallels with the causal approach to reference, but

differs from it principally in taking the sentence rather than the term as primary, and so in taking truth, rather than reference, as the key concept). In 'The Second Person', Davidson illustrates the point at issue by way of an example in which we identify a child as responding to a particular object or stimuli, namely, a table:

one line goes from the child in the direction of the table, one line goes from us in the direction of the table, and the third line goes between us and the child. Where the lines from child to table and us to table converge, 'the' stimulus is located. Given our view of child and world, we can pick out 'the' cause of the child's responses. It is the common cause of our response and the child's response.[41]

The three-way inter-relation that is evident here between interpreter, 'speaker' (the child) and object (the table) leads Davidson to talk, more generally, of three 'varieties of knowledge' – knowledge of oneself, knowledge of others, knowledge of the world – that underlie understanding and interpretation and that are intertwined in such a way any one variety of knowledge necessarily implicates the other two.[42] Thus knowledge of self is dependent on knowledge of others and of the world; knowledge of others is dependent on knowledge of self and the world; knowledge of the world is dependent on knowledge of self and of others.

In fact, one can already discern the basic structure at issue here in the structure that Davidson previously specified as part of the structure of radical interpretation. The radical interpreter is able to interpret utterances and identify beliefs only through locating the speaker or 'believer' in relation to her environment (which means identifying the worldly causes of the speaker's utterances and beliefs – the rabbit, for instance, that prompts the cry of 'Gavagai!). But doing this also depends on our relation to that same environment. The process of constructing a theory of interpretation for a speaker is indeed a matter of playing off these different elements in a manner that can also be described through the model of triangulation. Indeed, whether we talk of triangulation or the balancing of meaning against belief, in each case the underlying idea is that we arrive at a final determination of meaning or content through the interplay between elements in a way that necessarily includes our own attitudes and behavior, those of the speaker, and the worldly context in which both are located. Since the entire process also depends on the interconnection between these elements, so the process also depends on the same commitment to the interdependence of belief, and belief with meaning (and more generally of attitudes

with both linguistic and non-linguistic behavior), that is one of the explicit elements in charity, but which, in the structure of triangulation, can be seen as itself subsumed under the idea of the interconnectedness and interdependence of self, other and world. Indeed, with the idea of triangulation the externalist and holist elements in Davidson's position are brought neatly together through an emphasis on the interdependence of the subjective and inter-subjective (and so of belief and meaning) with the objective (and so with real-world events and entities), as well as the interdependence of subjectivity with intersubjectivity (an interdependence that obtains within the structure of meaning and belief).

Whether expressed in terms of the procedure of radical interpretation (and the requirement of charity) or the structure of triangulation, what is at issue here is not merely the conditions under which interpretation is possible. Davidson claims that the conditions at issue here are the conditions for the very possibility of meaning or content as such and this follows from the holistic character of belief and meaning as such, and so of attitudes and behavior, and of content. Norris, of course, seems to treat such holism as leading, apparently inevitably, into the abyss of relativism or anti-realism, but what is crucial about the Davidsonian position, and my own elaboration of that position, is that it actually commits one to an externalism according to which the very possibility of meaning and content is based in our <u>causal</u> embeddedess in the world – a causal embeddedness that also underpins our <u>intentional</u> connectedness to that world. On this basis, the holism at issue in Davidson's position and my own, would seem to imply, not relativism and anti-realism, but quite the opposite, since on the account advanced here, for meaning and content to be possible is for a certain form of realism to be true – a realism that insists on the world's accessibility to us and on the non-relativity of truth.

Norris claims that the concept of truth at work in Davidson has no substantive content. It certainly is true that Davidson rejects attempts to give a definition of truth that would go beyond the 'snow-bound trivialities' of Tarski. The truth of a sentence is dependent on just two things: what the words as spoken mean and the way the world is. But Davidson can be seen to employ an implicit distinction between truth as it inheres in particular sentences or propositions and truth as it inheres in our beliefs as such. Thus Davidson famously claims, though the claim is less common in his later work than in his earlier, that 'most of our beliefs must be true'. Although this claim presents some difficulties in explication (Davidson tends, for instance, to limit the

claim to 'our most basic beliefs'), it is best understood as directing attention to the way in which the truth of any particular sentence or proposition is always determined against the larger background of our worldy engagement – exactly the sort of engagement that I have described above. The truth of particular sentences is thus dependent on the prior 'truth' of our active engagement with ourselves, others and the world. It is thus that I have argued for parallels between the Davidsonian and the Heidegegrian/Gadamerian account according to which the truth of sentences (what Heidegger sometimes used to call 'truth as correctness') is itself founded in a more basic notion of truth as uncoveredness or disclosedness (truth understood as Unvergorgenheit, Aletheia and so forth) which is identical with the prior given-ness of the world and our involvement in it, and which appears in Gadamer as closely tied to dialogue or conversation (Gespräch).

Since truth attaches most straightforwardly to linguistic entities, in the absence of a community of language-users there can be no truths. Thus Davidson comments that 'Nothing would count as a sentence, and the concept of truth would therefore have no application, if there were not creatures who used sentences by uttering or inscribing tokens of them'.[43] It can be misleading, then, to express the idea of the objectivity of truth in terms of its complete independence of human practices, language or whatever – which is how it is sometimes expressed in certain 'strong' forms of realism. However, the dependence of truth on the existence of speakers in no way impugns the objectivity of truth. Whether an utterance is true depends, as Davidson has put it elsewhere, 'on just two things: what the words as spoken mean and how the world is arranged'.[44] And given an utterance with a specified meaning, whether it is true depends on one thing alone: the way the world is arranged. Of course, to admit the dependence that follows from the dependence of truth on meaning is not itself to admit a relativist or anti-realist conception of truth – relativism and anti-realism, as should be obvious from the discussion above, cannot be assumed to follow straightforwardly from holism, and are indeed incompatible with the externalist holism to be found in Davidson's work or in my own.

Yet although truth cannot be construed in a way that severs it from meaning, and so from communities of speakers, neither can one abandon the 'realist' distinction that obtains between belief and the objects of belief. Indeed, the very concept of belief, involving, as it does, the idea of 'holding true', always presupposes the conceptual distinction at issue. To hold some statement to be true, that is, to have

some belief, is to acknowledge the possibility that the belief in question might be false (even if the acknowledgment is merely of the logical possibility of falsity). Part of the concept of belief is, we might say, its fallibility. But we can only understand belief as fallible in this way if we can grasp the idea of something that belief is about and with respect to which it could indeed be false. In coming to understand another speaker we are always involved in adjusting our grasp of what the speaker believes in relation to what we hold to be true. Since interpretation is a process in which our own understanding of a speaker (and indeed of the world) is constantly adjusted in the light of the evidence that comes to hand, so the concept of belief as a state of <u>fallibly holding true</u> is absolutely essential to our being able to make such revisions and so to our being able, not only to attribute beliefs to others, but to have beliefs of our own. Without such a concept we would be unable to make sense of ourselves or of others – or of the world in which we are all located.

The distinction between belief and its objects, a distinction essential to (amongst other things) the possibility of content is not to be confused with the much more problematic set of distinctions that Davidson criticises under the heading of the 'myth of the subjective' and that includes the scheme-content dichotomy.[45] Rather than capturing a feature of the relation between belief or utterance and the objects and events they are about, these latter distinctions force upon us a global separation of belief, language, concept or 'subjectivity' in general from the world, experience, or 'objectivity' as a whole.[46] Such a global separation of elements undermines the possibility of understanding either of the elements at stake while also raising the impossible question of how such disparate elements might ever be brought into conjunction. The common and underlying problem for both 'strong ' or 'metaphysical' realism and for 'strong' or 'metaphysical' anti-realism (including the many varieties of relativism and constructivism) has been that both require us to grasp the 'subjective', whether in the guise of language, conceptual scheme, paradigm or 'theory', independently of the objective realm represented by 'the world', experience or 'the facts'. The difference between the two positions lies merely in the manner in which – and the extent to which – subjective and objective are brought together. Thus strong realism, for instance, reconnects subjective to objective by a relation of correspondence; constructivist anti-realism by a relation of 'constitution'. On the Davidsonian account I have sketched here both are equally unsatisfactory.

In his discussion of my work, Norris takes issue, not only with the Davidsonian premises on which I draw, but also with my employment of Heidegger. And while Norris may have changed his mind about Davidson, he has remained steadfast in his opposition to Heideggerian ways of thinking. Indeed, Norris' careful explication of Derrida as in no way committed to the relativist and anti-realist doctrines that are so often promoted in his name, could perhaps be viewed as an attempt, in part, to rescue Derrida from assimilation to a Heideggerian relativism and anti-realism. One way of construing my approach to Heidegger, however, has been analogous to Norris treatment of Derrida, but all too often I have found myself in the position of apparently trying to rescue Heidegger from assimilation to a relativism or anti-realism of a Derridaen cast. Indeed, this is one reason for looking to find ways not only of understanding Davidson in terms that draw him closer, on some points to Heidegger, but of understanding Heidegger, on some points, as standing much closer to Davidson than we may otherwise have anticipated.

Norris may argue, however, that on one issue at least Heidegger stands quite clearly apart from Davidson, and that is with respect to the Heideggerian critique of technology. This critique is sometimes seen as evidence of Heidegger's anti-scientific attitude,[47] and although Norris does not seem to me to be explicit in suggesting this, he does appear to view the Heideggerian critique of technology as itself symptomatic of Heidegger's relativistic and anti-realist commitment. There are a number of points that could be taken up in relation to Norris' treatment of Heidegger on technology, as well as on other matters, but I want to focus on just one issue. Heidegger claims that the very essence of technology, which is to say the essence of <u>modernity</u>,[48] consists in a tendency towards a certain ordering of the world in which everything is seen only as material or resource to be taken up within a never-ending process of transformation, transmission and consumption. The essence of technology is thus a certain sort of levelling-down of all things, including the human, that can be seen as perhaps best instantiated in the various forms of bureaucratisation and instrumentalism[49] that have so often been seen as the hallmarks of the modern world. The levelled-down ordering that lies at the heart of technology can also be seen to bring with it a change in the character of the way truth itself appears – rather than being tied to our particularised engagement in the world, and so to the interplay between self, other and thing, truth becomes merely another element in the constant 'regulation' of entities and events – something that that can be viewed in purely instrumental or pragmatic terms or else as

merely an 'effect' of other processes. Moreover, from a Heideggerian perspective this can be seen as manifest both in the tendency towards a relativised or 'anti-realist' conception of truth that renders it indistinguishable from 'belief' as well as certain 'realist' conceptions that reduce truth merely to a form of representational congruence or informational adequacy. In this respect, then, Heidegger's critique of technology, far from promoting a relativistic or anti-realist conception, whether of truth or of science, can be viewed as itself tied to a rejection of the relativistic and reductionist tendencies that he sees as closely tied up with technological modernity.

Yet whether or not we accept any of the Heideggerian critique of technology is strictly speaking irrelevant to the adequacy of the Heideggerian or Davidsonian accounts of understanding, meaning and content as arising only on the basis of our already given engagement with self, others and world. Moreover, Heidegger's critique of technology need not itself be incompatible with the particular form of 'realist' commitment that I have argued is central to Davidson's position as well as Heidegger's – a form of realism that retains the objectivity and non-relativity of truth, the accessibility of the world, and the reality of the events and entities that cause our attitudes and actions and towards which they are directed, while also recognising the necessary dependence that obtains between truth and meaning, and between subjective and objective. I am under no illusions, of course, that the account I have offered here will lead Norris to change his mind about Heidegger or my own work, or to reverse his change of attitude in relation to Davidson. At the very least, however, it may provoke some further engagement with the issues at stake – an engagement that I would argue can itself be seen to instantiate the very structure of truth that is the focus for both Heidegger and for Davidson.

Notes and References

[1] The term 'antirealism' is used here, as it is used by Norris, in quite a broad fashion to indicate a range of relativist and other approaches.

[2] See 'On not going relativist (where it counts): deconstruction and Convention T', The Contest of the Faculties (London: Methuen, 1985), pp.193-217.

[3] Resources of Realism (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp.1-40

[4] New idols of the cave: on the limits of anti-realism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp.6-43.

[5] The realism that I espouse here, and that I think was also something to which Davidson was committed, is not the same as any of those forms of realism (often referred to under labels such as

'metaphysical realism') that depend upon asserting some strong form of independence requirement (often in terms that tie such realism to scepticism) or that insist on treating truth as primarily a matter of correspondence between sentences and 'facts'. Rorty has, however, expressed his regret that 'Malpas resuscitates the term "realism" to describe Davidson's (and Heidegger's) view', instead expressing his preference for something like 'anti-Cartesianism' or 'anti-scepticism' (Philosophy and Social Hope, London: Penguin, 1999, p.43). I should also acknowledge, however, that Davidson himself came to abandon the term 'realism' describing it as a 'vague position' ('Indeterminism and Antirealism', Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, p.70). It may be that it is a mistake to insist on using the term (although my disagreement with Davidson on this matter does not seem to me to constitute a substantive point of difference), but it I simply do not see why the term 'realism' should be abandoned to what is, after all, the fairly recent and rather technical sense associated with various forms of Cartesianism, representationalism and reductionism. As I use it, realism means a commitment to the centrality of a notion of objective truth, and to the idea that the world, and the events and entities that make it up, are accessible to us, rather than apart from us – that the world is indeed that wherein we find ourselves.

[6] On Dreyfus, in particular, see the essay co-written with Charles Spinosa, 'Coping with Things-in-Themselves: A Practice-based Phenomenological Argument for Realism', Inquiry 42 (1999), pp.49-78; as well as the responses published together with the Dreyfus/Spinosa piece, by Mark Wrathall, Piers Rawling, TLS Sprigge, Richard Rorty and myself.

[7] See Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.204-208. While I would still hold to the core elements of the account advanced in this book, there are specific points on which I would now say things differently. Most importantly, the account of indeterminacy I offered in The Mirror of Meaning was woefully inadequate and on some points mistaken; there are aspects of the account of the Heideggerian position, and Davidson's relation to it, that I would modify; and I would not now employ the notion of 'horizon' in the way that I did in 1992 (in my own work that notion has largely been taken over by the concept of 'place' or 'topos' – see Place and Experience, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[8] Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning, pp.249-252

[9] Ibid., p.277.

[10] 'Indeterminism and Antirealism', Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, p.69.

[11] 'The Objectivity of Values', in Carlos Gutierrez (ed.), El Trabajo Filosofico de Hoy en el Continente (Bogota, Columbia: Editorial ABC, 1995), pp. 59-69 and also in Belgrade Circle 1-2 (1995), pp. 177-188 (in English and Serbian).; forthcoming in Problems of Rationality (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

[12] Norris, 'Some Dilemmas of Post-Empiricism', p.12.

[13] Ibid., pp.12-13.

[14] Ibid., p.13.

[15] Ibid., p.13. Apel's discussion appears as 'Comments on Davidson', in Synthese 59 (1984), pp.19-26. As Apel notes, his paper was intended as a reply to Davidson's 'Communication and Convention', which appeared in the same volume (both papers were presented at the same colloquium), but since Apel was not in possession of Davidson's paper, he prepared his comments on the basis of a version of 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' sent to him by Davidson. The Gricean example Apel deploys here mirrors the example used by Dummett in discussing Davidson's position in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Comments on Davidson and Hacking', in Ernest LePore (ed.), Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.472.

[16] Grice, 'Utterer's Meaning and Intentions', Philosophical Review 78 (1969), p.162.

[17] See Apel 'Comments on Davidson', p.24.

[18] Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', Journal of Philosophy 87 (1990), p.310.

[19] So Davidson points out that "A metaphor, for example, is wholly dependent linguistically on the usual meanings of words, however fresh and astonishing the thought it is used to express; and the interpreter, though he may be hard pressed to decode or appreciate a good metaphor, needs know no more about what words mean than can be, or ought to be, found in a good dictionary", 'James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty', in P. French, T. E. Uehling and H. Wettstein (eds.), Midwest Studies in Philosophy 16 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), p.1 and Davidson notes of Joyce that "like any writer he must depend on the knowledge his readers are able to bring to his writings. Much of this knowledge is verbal of course, knowledge of what words ordinarily mean" but

20 also adding that "in Joyce's case much of what is required must come from other sources…" ('James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty', p.8).

20 In Ernest LePore (ed.), Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.433-446.

21 In Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn. 2001), pp.xx-xx

22 Davidson, 'The Social Aspect of Language', in Brian McGuinness and Gianluigi Oliveri (eds.), The Philosophy of Michael Dummett (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994).

23 This claim appears in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', p.446 and is defended and explained further in 'The Social Aspect of Language'.

24 Norris, 'Some Dilemmas of Post-Empiricism', p.13.

25 Ibid., p.14.

26 Indeed, neither does it seem to me to give priority to the idiolect over the dialect – in spite of the fact that Davidson occasionally talked of it that way.

27 See Davidson 'The Second Person', in P. French, T. E. Uehling and H. Wettstein (eds.), Midwest Studies in Philosophy 17 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pp.255-267.

28 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', p.446.

29 Norris, 'Some Dilemmas of Post-Empiricism', p.15.

30 Norris, 'On not going relativist (where it counts): deconstruction and Convention T', Contest of the Faculties (London: Methuen, 1985), p.215.

31 'On not going relativist', pp.212-213. Later in the same paper he comments that "The point of appealing to Convention T is to back up the loose but (in practice) indispensable conviction that we know far more than relativist doctrine allows us to know" (p.216).

32 Norris, 'Some Dilemmas of Post-Empiricism', p.17.

33 'On not going relativist', p.216.

34 Thus Gadamer writes that in conversation (Gespräch), which is Gadamer's model for the way in which understanding occurs, 'Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another… To reach an understanding in a dialogue is thus not merely as matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were', Truth and Method, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), pp.378-9.

35 See my discussion of this point in 'Gadamer, Davidson and the Ground of Understanding', in Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald, Jens Kertscher (eds.), Gadamer's Century (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), pp.209-10.

36 This idea can be seen as essentially a development of the Heideggerian idea of the character of understanding as based in facticity – in our prior ontological situatedness, and it is this idea that I take to lie at the heart of Heidegger's concept of truth as aletheia or 'uncoveredness' (a notion also taken up by Gadamer).

37 On this see my 'On Not Giving Up the World: Davidson on the Grounds of Belief', forthcoming.

38 That Davidson's externalism can indeed be seen to follow from his holism is a point I have argued for elsewhere: see esp. Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning, pp.220-223 and 'Self-Knowledge and Scepticism', Erkenntnis 40 (1994), pp.165-184.

39 See, for instance, 'Belief and the Basis of Meaning' in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, pp.xx-xx.

40 The idea of triangulation first appeared in 'Rational Animals', Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective (Oxford: Clarendon press, 2002), p.105, originally published in 1982.

41 'The Second Person', Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, p.119. The use of this example illustrates something of the way in which the development of the idea of triangulation in Davidson originates in consideration of the significance of ostensive teaching and learning – see Davidson, 'Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers', in Peter Kotatko, Peter Pagin and Gabriel Segal (eds.), Interpreting Davidson (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), p.99 – the relevant passage is quoted by Davidson in 'Externalisms', in Kotatko et al (eds.), Interpreting Davidson, p.9.

42 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, pp.205-20.

43 'The Structure and Content of Truth', p.300.

44 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', p.309

45 See Davidson, 'The Myth of the Subjective', in Michael Krausz (ed.), Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp.159-172.

⁴⁶ This point is also relevant to Norris's suggestion (on p.28) that it is nonsensical to recommend "on the one hand…that we give up 'the dualism of scheme of [sic] world' (along with all notions of truth as correspondence), while on the other invoking just such a dualist scheme with all its talk of sentences rendered 'true or false' by virtue of their correspondence – what else? – with real-world objects or states of affairs". There need be no conflict between the claim that correspondence does not provide an adequate explication of truth and the claim that a true sentence 'corresponds to' or 'fits' the facts. The point is not that we cannot make use of these latter phrases, but that we ought not to think that they offer any proper elucidation of the phrase 'is true'. Similarly, talk of sentences being true in virtue, in part, of the way the world is need not be taken to reinvoke the dualism of scheme and content

⁴⁷ It is important to note that while Heidegger does reject 'scientism,' if by that we mean the privileging of natural scientific accounts over all others, he nowhere rejects the truth of scientific claims. It should perhaps be noted that in this discussion I have not specifically addressed the issue of scientific realism as a separate question from realism as such. Norris' claim that the explanatory effectiveness of science ought to be taken as evidence of its truth, and so of the reality of the entities, events and processes that figure in scientific theorising, does not seem to me, however, to be incompatible with the account I have advanced here. The point is not that science gives us a false picture of the world, or that the picture it provides is nothing more than a particular parochial vision of things relative to a certain time, place and social practice, but rather than natural science does not tell us all there is to know about the world and our relation to it (something that can itself be seen as enshrined in Davidsonian anomalous monism – see Davidson's own comments on 'scientism' in 'Indeterminism and Antirealism', <u>Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective</u>, pp.70-71) and that there is no natural scientific description of the world (or any other description for that matter) that is uniquely true.

⁴⁸ Thus the Heideggerian critique is directed at certain pervasive features of the contemporary world, rather than at science or technology as specific institutional features of that world, and for this reason Heidegger is able still to talk about finding a way of engaging with technology that does not give rise to the levelling-down of things that he finds so problematic.

⁴⁹ In, for instance, the work of Max Weber – see Julien Freund's brief summary of the Weberian idea of 'rationalisation' in Freund, <u>The Sociology of Max Weber</u> (New York: Random House, 1968), pp.17-25 & 142-148 as well as J. M. Berstein's discussion of Adorno's critique of scientific rationalism in <u>Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Hubert Dreyfus suggests connections between the Heideggerian critique of technology and ideas in Foucault's work, see 'On the Ordering of Things: Being and Power in Heidegger and Foucault', in <u>Michel Foucault: Philosopher</u>, ed. Timothy Armstrong (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992); see also Neil Levy 'The Prehistory of Archaeology: Heidegger and the early Foucault', <u>Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology</u> 27 (1996), 157-175.